Brake, RSA and Specsavers are calling on the government to rectify this staggering anomaly that puts lives in danger. We are calling for it to be made compulsory for drivers to have their eyes examined at least every 10 years, which could tie in with renewing photocards. This should be carried out by qualified opticians or a medical practitioner using a scientifically-recognised method.

**Current rules**

During the driving test, the examiner gives the driver three chances to read a number-plate from 20 metres for vehicles with new-style number-plate or 20.5 metres for vehicles with old-style plates.

After that drivers (of cars, small vans and motorbikes) won’t have to take any form of eye examination to keep their licence for the rest of their life. They only have to take an eye examination if they report serious vision impairment to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). Once they reach age 70, drivers are asked to confirm they have acceptable vision to renew their licence, but they are not required to prove this.

**Testing methods**

The government believes the number-plate test is a suitable method for testing eyesight when drivers take their test, and that asking drivers to regularly test themselves using this method and self-report problems is an effective system to ensure drivers have the vision required to drive safely.

In fact, number plate test is a very poor measure of vision. It does not provide a standardised measure of distance vision, as depending on the sequence of letters and numbers in the number plate the ease of reading will vary. Results can also vary in different lighting or weather conditions.

It also doesn’t test for peripheral vision (visual field) which are part of the minimum standards legally required for UK drivers mandated by EU law. Additionally, it can’t test for contrast sensitivity, glare sensitivity and ocular motility (eye movement), which are all important for safe driving.

The only way to ensure a level of vision fit for the road is to undergo a proper eye examination with a qualified optician or a medical practitioner using a scientifically-recognised method.

**Testing frequency**

Many drivers fall short of the required standard of vision, posing a risk to themselves and others. Research estimates that up to five million UK drivers would fail a simple number-plate if they had to take it again.

While the government relies on drivers to ensure their eyesight is up to standard, nearly half fail to get their eyes examined by a qualified optician every two years as recommended by the NHS.

This can lead to drivers having uncorrected vision, and undiagnosed eye diseases, which only get worse the longer they are left untreated. It is possible to lose 40% of your vision before you even realise you have a problem, which is why regular examination by a trained professional is vital, and why relying on self-reporting and self-certifying is a seriously flawed method.

The impact of poor eyesight on a person’s ability to drive safely, and therefore their crash risk, is well documented through academic research. It is estimated that every year more than 2,000 crashes are caused by drivers with poor vision, resulting in almost 2,900 casualties.
Calls for action

Brake, RSA and Specsavers are calling for the government to introduce a requirement for eye examinations to be carried out by qualified opticians or a medical practitioner using a scientifically-recognised method.

This would replace the current number-plate test for the driving test, and would be the method by which drivers prove their standard of vision throughout their career.

They are also calling for regular retesting of drivers. We propose drivers should be required to produce evidence of a recent eye examination at the same time as renewing their licence photocard on a 10 yearly basis, and when reapplying for their licence on reaching 70 and thereafter.

This would be a simple and inexpensive step that would vastly improve driver eyesight in the UK.

Alongside this, the government should carry out awareness-raising publicity and issue reminders advising drivers of the importance of getting their eyes examined at least every two years. Two ways of doing this with no additional costs attached are to use motorway gantries, and include reminders on DVLA documentation issued for tax disc renewal.

End notes

1 HC Deb, 15 June 2011, c313 W H. Available at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cm翰and/cm110615/halltext/110615h0002.htm#11061540000559
6 Utton, T. Millions of motorists are driving blind, The Daily Mail. Available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1446788/Millions-motorists-driving-blind.html
7 Ibid
8 Ibid
11 Fit to Drive: a cost benefit analysis of more frequent eyesight testing for UK drivers, RSA Insurance Group plc, 2012.